

MUSLIMS FIND SPIRITUAL HOME AT MIDWESTERN MOSQUE

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WASHINGTON, SEPTEMBER 24 -- A modest building with a blue dome, the Darul Arqum Islamic Center nestles in a quiet neighborhood not far from the State University of Iowa in Ames. The mosque serves members of the local Muslim community, including international students.

Saleem Baig, vice chairman of the mosque, said there are about 500 Muslims in Ames. The center has about 120 permanent members. The congregation outgrew the original mosque, located in a house, and fundraising began.

The new mosque was built and opened in November 2001. Just two months after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, the timing was delicate, but the mosque doors were opened to the local community.

"Close to 2,000 people showed up," Baig said, and interest continues. "We invite people and we have open house. A lot of people show up. Some of them are curious."

Although there was initial resistance from a few neighbors worried about increased traffic, the Ames community supported the mosque building project. The city council voted in favor of it, and the chief of police even spoke at Friday prayers.

"He assured us there would be no trouble: 'If there is any problem, you call us,'" Baig recalls him saying. Baig and other members of the Ames mosque spoke to USINFO in August.

Interfaith dialogue is integral to the center's activity. Civil engineering consultant Waddah Akili, a longtime member of the mosque, said he attends Ames Interfaith Council meetings "to bridge the gap if there are gaps to be bridged and to try to understand each other's position." The monthly meetings draw many denominations. "We try first to get to know each other before we try to tackle any specific issues," Akili says.

A guest speaker at Darul Arqum Friday prayers, Imam of the Islamic Center of Des Moines Ibrahim Dremali, described a four-day course on Islam he gives at different Iowa churches to encourage understanding and dialogue. "We speak, all the religions together. To be honest with you, my main job is to build the bridges between Muslims and non-Muslims."

POLITICS AND COMMUNITY

Pakistani Salman Maqsood is interested in American politics. "Most of us, where we come from, the society is so-called democratic, but the culture is not that democratic. So people really don't know what democracy is, what is raising your issues and taking them ... all the way up to the head of state or [to] your local representatives."

Dremali, who has lived in the United States for 20 years, said since that September 11, 2001, "the Muslim community has become more involved" in politics.

Maqsood thinks "people realized after [September 11] that they had to have a voice, they had to let people know what their religion is, who we are; we are not terrorists."

Maqsood believes his personal faith has benefited from living in America. Unlike in Pakistan, there is no call to prayer five times a day from mosques everywhere. "You have to set your alarm, things like that, so you don't miss it. Over there, no one ever came and asked me 'why do you pray ... why do you fast?'" he said. "Now I have to research sometimes and find out the answers so if someone asks me, I can at least tell them what my beliefs are, what is the reason behind it."

All those interviewed believed Muslims are accepted in Iowa, and misunderstandings usually are ironed out by conversations.

"If I want to practice my religion as Muslim, I can do it in America," says Nermin Sabry, principal of the mosque's school. Parents concerned about teaching children Muslim ideals send them to weekend classes in Arabic, the Quran and Islamic values. Sabry says many American and Muslim values are the same. "We raise our children to be honest, not to lie, to be good," but there are some different concepts about dress and behavior.

Her daughter, Heba, a student at the university who wears hijab, said peers accept her different standards: "For example, a school dance. I just don't feel very comfortable with it, and I explain it to people and they are generally accepting and they say 'ok if that's what you want, that's fine.'" When she competed on the high school track team, the track association gave her permission to observe her Islamic dress code at meets.

Marjan, an Iranian doctor researching cancer therapies, says she and her friends believe that "Americans, they behave very much like the real Muslims should behave ... their manners and their behavior are what Islam has suggested to us," except some who "do wrong things." Citing values such as honesty, respect and tolerance, she adds, "Most Americans, they are really practicing Islam, the real Islam."

Beth Sermin, one of several American converts in the congregation, performs interfaith outreach. "People realize that tolerance is the best way, so that everybody can live together in peace," she said.

More information (<http://www.arqum.org/index.cfm>) on the mosque is available on its Web site.

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